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# Changing Methods, Changing Libraries: Making Digital Literacy Accessible for Undergraduate Researchers

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# The Path

## ENGLISH 495: AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY

The seeds for this senior project were planted the spring semester of my junior year. I was enrolled in English 495, American Biography. As part of a well-rounded liberal arts education, we were required to include a digital element with our biographical profiles. This supplement was meant to stretch and enhance our storytelling abilities, using digital tools to create something equally as individual as our biographies. Our challenge, then, was to translate the tactile experience of being in the archives into a digital medium. For my classmate Cara Haley and me, it was important to find a way to tell these stories long past the end of the semester and broadcast them to a larger audience. We began to develop the blueprint for an online exhibit so that our projects – the persons we had grown to know, understand, and cherish – would have a life beyond the archives.



From the American Biography Showcase Homepage  
<http://www.hopestudentresearch.omeka.net>

After consulting with our classmates and peers, Cara and I found a trend: exciting original research is produced in many upper-level classes, but with the understanding that only a handful of projects will be seen by an audience outside of their class and discipline, much less Hope College. We had discovered an issue of academic visibility and sustainability, and this where we found our main drive. Cara and I grappled with how we could preserve the high-level collaborative research being produced – not by burying it in a digital archive, but by displaying and sustaining it with the support of a collaborative community. What if we could be on the leading edge of showcasing our work, not only engaging in our respective scholarly conversations, but beginning a new one?



From the Anna Ellenbaas Exhibit

## SUMMER 2013 RESEARCH GRANT

Seeing the need for a larger-scale student scholarship showcase, Professor Natalie Dykstra, Cara, and myself met with Hope College CIT and Van Wylen library staff. We discovered that with faculty leadership, the possibility of a large-scale student scholarship showcase would be likely to receive support. We wrote a research proposal outlining the plan for a "proof of concept" website. The proposal was approved and I received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon foundation. I researched various digital showcasing methods and utilized Omeka to expand the exhibit for English 495 and add the capacity for other classes and projects. By creating an example of what an online showcase could offer faculty and students, I was able to tackle several questions about the way academic research can be presented digitally. I developed an answer to the difference between archiving work and showcasing it, proposed theories about the duration of a project's online life, and researched copyright rules related to archival work and web displays. This research became the basis for the redesign of the Special Collections webpage and creation of the Scholarship Showcase.

# CHANGING METHODS, CHANGING LIBRARIES:

## Making Digital Literacy Accessible for Undergraduate Researchers

Andrew W. Mellon Scholars Foundation & The Hope College English Department

Taylor Rebhan

### ABSTRACT

Rooted in research accomplished in the summer of 2013 with a fellowship from the Andrew W. Mellon Scholars Foundation, this project focuses on the rapidly changing landscapes of scholarship and storytelling in the Humanities. These changes have come about as myriad of digital tools are now available to undergraduate scholars. From showcasing to researching, students now have unprecedented access to and support for these tools. I show through personal experience as an undergraduate Digital Humanities researcher that as these supplements are honed and further developed, they allow student scholars to ask new questions in their research, answer them accordingly, and display their original work in a refreshing and wide-reaching manner. However, these advances in digital methods also raise concerns for sustainability and integration with traditional research. Hope College's Van Wylen Library is an example of an institution that strives to be on the leading edge of the digital humanities and is seeking to address these concerns. Knowing that collaboration is the backbone of a thriving digital liberal arts community, it has taken steps to create new conversations between communities and individuals. I propose several ways in which Van Wylen has accomplished this, as well as several ways that they can in the future. As digital librarianship shows, though technological advances tools are shifting the way scholars think about research, storytelling is still the heart of scholarship.

### WHAT IS THIS PROJECT?

Through a collaborative push to create outlets for showcasing student scholarship, we initiated and carried out a redesign of the Special Collections at Hope College website. The Rare Books, Joint Archives, Digital Commons, and Image Collections pages have been rewritten and reorganized to better display the archival material and primary sources that are available. To further encourage students to tackle research topics using the Special Collections, we created an accompanying showcase page.

The student scholarship page displays both course projects and student projects. Course projects are assignments given to an entire class that utilize the Special Collections. Similarly, student projects are undertakings by individual students and their faculty advisors that use resources from the collections. By showcasing these projects, the Special Collections website inspires both students and faculty seeking to create their own, distinctive scholarship. It also serves as a platform for students to disseminate their work through the college website. By linking to these select projects, a standard of excellence in collaboration and creative scholarship is formed.



The Student Scholarship Showcase on the Special Collections website.  
[http://www.hope.edu/lib/special/student\\_scholarship](http://www.hope.edu/lib/special/student_scholarship) courtesy of Hope College, 2014.

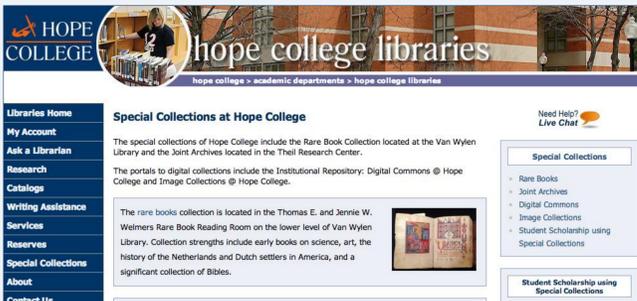
### HOW CAN I USE IT?

As part of my senior Mellon Scholars project, the Digital and Multimedia Tools page has been my main focus. My goal for this resource is to give back to the library and student community that it came from. By making an updateable, well-organized, researched list of digital tools and resources for current and future student researchers, I was able to make my scholarship lift weight in a scholarly and creative way.

There are links for project ideas and supplements to papers, tools to aide in writing and researching, methods for digital presentations, and a wide array of online dissemination options. This is active digital literacy: equipping students with the tools they need to become proficient digital liberal arts majors. It is more than just teaching research methods and how to acquire knowledge online. It encourages creative models of scholarship and distribution. Fostering these digital skills in undergraduate researchers is essential for a liberal arts school in this day and age, and as the Special Collections webpages show, Van Wylen library is well equipped to do that.

*"Digital humanities can enable researchers and students to test out and compare the implications of different models of thinking. They can pick up the gaps and the silences as well as the 'certainties,' and experiment with the challenges of 'what if?'"*

- Elton Barker

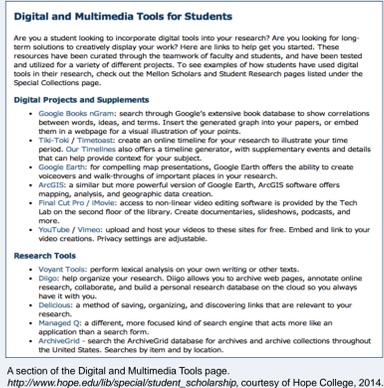


The Special Collections at Hope College webpage, redesigned through collaborative work to include a showcase.  
<http://www.hope.edu/lib/special>, courtesy of Hope College, 2014.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The intention of the digital project has been twofold. First, it serves as a way for Van Wylen Library to better communicate the richness of the Special Collections at Hope College. By redesigning the pages and adding new features, the site makes these collections more appealing and accessible to students. With clearer and more concise copy and layout, the pages bring the collections to life. Faculty can point their students to these pages, encouraging them to find the collection that engages their interest. Student projects are shown as examples of the kind of cutting edge research and scholarship that can be created in synthesis with the primary sources in the collections.

Secondly, the goal of this digital project is to reveal how the library and students can collaborate, both creatively and practically. The redesign of the Special Collections page is just one of many steps that even a small library like Van Wylen can take to further the digital literacy of their students – giving them the ability to find and create original scholarship, as well collaborate, and sustain it through digital tools and resources.



A section of the Digital and Multimedia Tools page.  
[http://www.hope.edu/lib/special/student\\_scholarship](http://www.hope.edu/lib/special/student_scholarship), courtesy of Hope College, 2014.

# The Future

## WHAT WE LEARNED

The Special Collections are just a small selection of the vast array of library resources offered by Hope College. However, these collections proved to be the perfect platform for digital renovation. It is our hope that this project will begin many more conversations about showcasing and archiving student scholarship, particularly research that uses digital tools and display methods. Because research within the Special Collections is often suited for integration with digital tools, the projects that are linked to on the showcase page are perfect examples of cutting edge digital scholarship.

As demonstrated by the path of this project, collaboration – whether it's between students and faculty, students and the library, or otherwise – is the backbone of a thriving digital scholarship community. When conversations occur between communities and individuals, solutions and new ideas for scholarship arise. Sustaining these conversations is key. To make one's research viable is to make it public – and the digital humanities can make that happen.

## LOOKING FORWARD

The following are three suggestions for continuing to develop an active digital humanities community within the context of undergraduate research and librarianship.

1. Create a support system and community within the library specifically dedicated to assist with showcasing work. This would be a direct application of a resource such as the Digital and Multimedia Tools page. With a network of feedback and guidance, student that utilize these tools would have the help necessary to ensure that their projects successfully supplement their scholarly work.

1. Broaden the scope of the student showcase, allowing for a cross-disciplinary, college-wide resource. By standardizing the procedures and guidelines for an online gallery of student scholarship, questions of copyright and project duration would be definitively answered. Students and faculty would have a guaranteed outlet and audience, allowing their high-caliber work to actively engage in conversation even after the semester ends.

1. Offer digital literacy workshops for faculty and students. By integrating a creative digital education with traditional scholarly training, new and exciting questions can be asked, answered, and broadcast to the world.

## THANKS

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